

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 20

24 July 1985

# Thinking Things Over

—By Vermont Royster—

## Banning the Bomb

Let's suppose that when Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev meet this fall they agree not only to stop making atom bombs but also to get rid of the ones the U.S. and the Soviet Union already have.

That takes a lot of supposing, to be sure, but since there's no limit on imagination, let's suppose it anyway.

That would banish the specter of atomic war, right? Wrong.

For the U.S. and the Soviet Union no longer have a duopoly on possession of atomic weapons, much less do they alone have the know-how on making them. Atom bombs and the secret of making them are scattered all over the globe.

Three other countries in addition to the two "superpowers" are officially members of the atomic community—Britain, France and China. That is, they not only have the know-how to make atom bombs but actually have them, and their possession of them is known.

But this is only the beginning. A decade ago India made a test explosion, successful, which demonstrated its capacity to build bombs. Twenty-six countries have nuclear-power reactors now, and about a dozen of them have the capability to reprocess their nuclear fuels into uranium of the quality for making atom bombs. Thus they have the ability to take the next step, though they haven't done so openly. Since much of this processing of bomb-grade uranium proceeds in various degrees of secrecy, counting the number of such countries is a sort of guessing game.

Informed guessers put Israel in this group, the guess being that Israel got its first atomic bomb in 1968 and by 1973 may have had more than a dozen nuclear weapons. Some readers may recall the story of the mysterious disappearance of a small freighter loaded with "yellowcake" (uranium oxide) in the Mediterranean that, rumor had it, ended up in Israel.

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Other nations suspected by U.S. intelligence of being in various degrees of readiness to make their own bombs, small or large, include Pakistan, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina and Iraq. Enough, anyway, to raise a new specter over the proliferation of atomic bombs.

All this has come about despite a 1958 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty signed by 123 nations. The reason for this proliferation, acknowledged or hidden, isn't difficult to find. By now the technical knowledge to build atomic bombs is too widespread to deter any determined nation with the money to proceed. Young physics students (but not I) can find most of what they need to know from standard technical books or even the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

It's no longer necessary, either, for a nation to have a costly, advanced missile system to deliver a bomb. One can be packed now in a suitcase and carried anywhere.

President Reagan and Chairman Gorbachev know this, and it is one reason (among many) why imagining they would agree to destroy their bombs is a fanciful dream. Yet the existence of all this nuclear proliferation seems to have had no effect on those who parade under the slogan "ban the bomb." Some of them, of course, are disguised sympathizers of the Soviet Union and in reality are seeking to have the U.S. ban the bomb unilaterally. Some of them are merely unsophisticates who may truly think that if we took the lead and banned the bomb unilaterally then the Soviet Union would follow.

But the lesson of proliferation is that even in the imaginary case that both these powers were in fact to destroy their nuclear arsenal and agree to build no more bombs, that would not end the threat of nuclear havoc.

On the contrary, it could well be that having the two superpowers facing each other with their enormous nuclear arsenals may be a safeguard. Since each knows that it could be destroyed as well as destroy, that knowledge could stay them from launching their weapons. At least it has for the past 40 years since the atom bomb first became a reality.

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More, the knowledge that the two superpowers, either or both, could obliterate any other nation tempted to use a bomb—an India, say, or a Pakistan—may be the best deterrent against their use. Without the fear of that, there would be little to discourage one of these lesser powers from using its bomb against a neighbor with whom it was quarreling. Fear is often the best safeguard against recklessness.

However that may be, it's the best hope we have against the outbreak of an atomic war somewhere. It is no longer possible for the two superpowers to end that threat by an agreement between themselves, or as Gen. Charles de Gaulle is reported to have once remarked, "*Les deux grandes ne sont plus les maitres du monde.*"

The two great powers should have already learned that they are no longer masters of the world. They are certainly no longer alone the masters of the secrets locked within the atom.

This in no way diminishes the importance of the meeting between Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev. It would still be useful if the two nations they represent could agree on some mutually verifiable arms reductions. That would help reduce the tensions between the two and reduce the economic burden each must bear to keep expanding their arsenal of weapons, a burden, incidentally, even heavier for the Soviet Union than it is for the U.S.

But we should be under no illusion that anything agreed to by the two nations these men represent can banish the atomic threat. Although it's terrible to contemplate, it's true that the atomic genie unleashed at Alamogordo cannot be returned whence it came. Knowledge once gained by the human mind cannot be hidden from other minds. Even the gods could not take back the secret of fire once Prometheus had stolen it and given it to men.